



News Release

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Utah Department of Health Records Life and Death Events for 100 Years

2.5 Million Births and 640,000 Deaths Recorded Since 1905

(Salt Lake City, UT) – When Utah Governor John Christopher Cutler created the Office of Vital Records and Statistics (OVRs) in 1905, Teddy Roosevelt was President, Albert Einstein proposed his theory of relativity and postage stamps cost only two cents. One-hundred years later, OVRs has documented about 2.5 million births and 640,000 deaths.

The Utah Department of Health (UDOH) marked OVRs's 100-year anniversary today during a celebration that highlighted changes in vital records over the past century, as well as the impact that health statistics have made at both the local and national levels. First Lady Mary Kaye Huntsman also presented Heritage Birth Certificates to three Utah Centenarians who were born the same year that OVRs was formed.

In addition to birth and death certificates, the Office also collects information on marriages, divorces, adoptions, paternities (adding a father to a birth certificate), and stillbirths. The records gathered over the past century have come to represent a variety of important benefits to the citizens of Utah, as well as to public health, law enforcement, insurance companies, community planners, educators, and policy makers.

“We’re able to gather and analyze information that can improve lives,” said Barry Nangle, Director, Utah Center for Health Data, UDOH. “Without public health’s dedication to collecting vital statistics, families would have a difficult time establishing many legal rights, such as inheritance, citizenship and parentage.”

“Certificates from vital records are used throughout our lives,” said Mrs. Huntsman. “In raising my six children, we’ve needed birth certificates for school registration, little league baseball, getting a driver’s license and travel.”

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The data gathered from vital records have often been the driving force for public health programs that have improved the quality and length of life for many Utah residents. In many ways, OVRS acts as a barometer of public health by tracking trends such as the drastic decrease in death rates from infectious diseases (from a peak of 236.7 per 100,000 people in 1920 to 8.1 in 2000) and infant mortality rates (from 71.4 per 100,000 live births in 1920 to a record low of 4.9 in 2003).

An early example of vital statistics' potential impact came in the 19th century when forward-thinking health practitioners used geographic data to determine that plagues and epidemics were concentrated in economically depressed areas within cities. "Death certificates were used to show that," Nangle said. "The conclusion that it was unsanitary conditions really followed from that information on where deaths were occurring."

Death certificates also showed that infectious diseases and their complications, such as pneumonia, diarrhea and enteritis, tuberculosis, typhoid fever, and scarlet fever, were leading causes of death in the early 1900s. The leading causes of death today are primarily chronic diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes.

Thanks to vital records we know about how long one can expect to live. The average life expectancy for a baby born in the U.S. in 1905 was 52 years. A baby born in the U.S. today can expect to live more than 77 years. Vital records make it possible to compare health conditions from state to state or to the nation as a whole. Such data have shown that Utah is one of the healthiest states in the nation and has the third highest life expectancy in the country.

Today, information gleaned from Utah birth and death certificates has led to a variety of important health discoveries. Since the mid-1970s, information from those records has been entered into the Utah Population Database managed at the University of Utah. The population database also includes family history information and records from the Utah Cancer Registry and has been used in studies for gene discovery.

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Initiatives such as Baby Your Baby, a program designed to promote prenatal care, began in the late 1980s, due to data records gathered, sorted and analyzed by the Vital Records statisticians. “Utah enjoys a good reputation nationally for basing public health policies on sound and reliable information,” said Dr. David Sundwall, Executive Director, UDOH. “Collecting birth and death data has been the foundation for public health research, intervention and policy for more than 100 years.”

“This system has been the primary source of the most fundamental public health information used to track the health status of the U.S. population and to set health policy at the national, state and local levels,” said Charles J. Rothwell, Director, National Vital Statistics System, National Center for Health Statistics. “Vital records is a cooperative system involving all levels of government, private citizens, the health care community, public health – everyone pitches in to provide information.”

Technology has improved the process for keeping records. The process has evolved from paper to mechanical devices and eventually to computers. Early processes of using card sorters or punch cards were cumbersome and time consuming. What used to take hours can now be done in minutes. In 1999, OVRs transformed the collection of birth records into a fully electronic, paperless format.

Not all the information OVRs collects deals with complicated statistical data. For example, OVRs can tell you the most popular baby names. In 1905, Thelma, Hazel, Mildred, Edna, Arthur, Melvin, Charles and George were some of the top 10 names for boys and girls. Today’s favorites include Emma, Madison, Emily, Olivia, Ethan, Jacob, Samuel and Joshua.

Vital records offices are stationed in each of Utah’s 12 local health departments. The central office is located at 288 North 1460 West in Salt Lake City. For more information about vital records, contact your local health department or visit www.health.utah.gov.

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The mission of the Utah Department of Health is to protect the public's health through preventing avoidable illness, injury, disability and premature death, assuring access to affordable, quality health care, and promoting healthy lifestyles.